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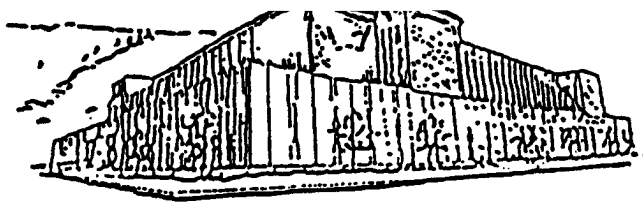
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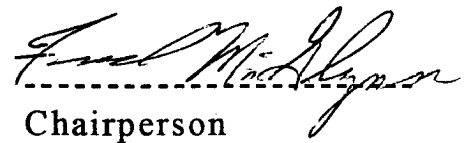


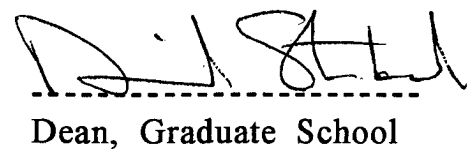
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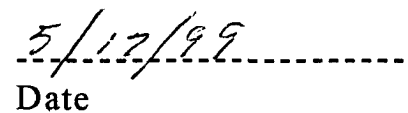
by  
Clark Chatlain  
B.A., University of Montana, 1997

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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1999

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Chatlain, Clark D., M.A., May 1999

Philosophy

Without Horizon: Encountering Shoah Testimony (65 pages)

Director: Fred McGlynn *F. McG.*

This paper examines the possibilities of encountering the Shoah through testimony and asks what kind of relations we can enter into with it. It contrasts the power of traditional philosophy, the power to organize, gather, and assimilate, with encounter and difference. Both are relations, but the first, a relation of knowledge, is a power relation, wherein alterity is subsumed and neutralized beneath the desire for omnipresent unity. The second is a relation not of power but of difference, wherein alterity and difference are affirmed.

The paper argues that a deep sense of responsibility is born out of encountering Shoah testimony, and it relies heavily on the thought of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas to make this argument. In encountering the Other, we are bound to the Other and must answer to and for her. While no response is adequate to the enormity of the Shoah's destruction, a response must nevertheless be made. Thus, as the inheritors of a history, of our particular history, we must respond to the horrors of the Shoah.

## Preface

During my first encounter with Shoah testimony, I felt an inexpressible failure, a failure that bordered on guilt. This sense of failure stemmed not only from the inadequacy of my philosophical ability to make sense out of the horrible, but was rooted in the personal encounter itself. Each time I opened a book of testimony I stood in some sense accused, my failure exposed and driven out into the open, even though, as I said, it was an inexpressible failure. I felt the need to respond, and felt the equally strong frustration of lacking an adequate response. The following pages try to give body to this failure, to this inexpressible sense of accusation.

But how does one express the inexpressible? It is a question that permeates any study of the Shoah, and thus, has a rightful place in a study of our responsibility. One begins, I think, by questioning the bounds of expression, by questioning the bounds of what is meant by "expressing." What is the encounter? What is knowledge? But our questions must push further than even these fundamental questions. Is knowledge here possible? Does encounter preclude knowledge? Is it a prelude to knowledge? And so on. Thus, in many ways, this piece questions philosophy itself. It questions its ability to answer to all of our relations, and it questions its focus on being and knowledge as the primary aspects of human life.

It is for these reasons that I turned to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot, for it seems to me that, with Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, these two philosophers have

put philosophy into question in just these ways. But even more importantly, there is a focus on the ethical so vivid and central to these thinkers that their very voices resonated deeply with my (inadequately expressed) concerns about responsibility and failure. Here, in the radical phenomenology of these two thinkers, was a language that, while still unable to express the inexpressible, could delineate this sense of responsibility and its occultation.

Thus, there are two threads to the following pages. The first focuses on the inability of philosophy to answer to our relations with testimony and the Shoah itself. Philosophy is power, the power to assimilate, to organize, and to control. What philosophy, which is in this sense despotic, fears is alterity, that which falls outside its bounds. The occultation of responsibility arises out of philosophical thinking, at least philosophy as we traditionally think of it, because philosophy's ability to occupy thought neutralizes any sense of the other and alterity.

The second thread rests on Levinas' sense of responsibility. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other strips me of my power to assimilate, and thus, I am in a relation not of power, as in the knowledge relation, but of immediacy. Here, the Other presides over me infinitely, and I must respond. This notion of responsibility resonates deeply with the sense of failure I feel when encountering Shoah testimony. I am powerless before the Other, before the testimony of the Other, and thus am bound to the Other. A different relation begins to reveal itself, one not defined by power and assimilation, but by difference.



But many important questions remain. What do I have to say about the Shoah? Indeed, what do any of us, we who did not experience life in the camps or in the deadly Eastern countryside, have to say about this singular, burning moment? Of course, in a sense, this piece is my response to this question. To remember, to encounter, and to respond are not options, but integral parts of our responsibility. And though the sense of failure remains, probably will always remain, here is a response. Is it an adequate response? Certainly not. What would an adequate response be?

I have not seen it myself, but I have heard that behind Notre Dame there is, buried in the ground, accessible only by a steep staircase, an unmarked Shoah memorial. From what I hear, it is very simple. Is this the adequate response, an unmarked memorial? Is this silent symbol adequate? Since I have heard of this memorial, I have always thought it would seem more appropriate to fill it in, to bulldoze dirt and crushed cement staircase and metal handrails into the hole, to cover and bury it. Think of it down there in the cold ground. But a terrible silence, too, is inadequate. And we are left only with the imperative of a strong pessimism: through all the inadequacy and failure, an approach must be made.

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You who live safe  
In your warm houses,  
You who find, returning in the evening,  
Hot food and friendly faces:  
    Consider if this is a man  
    Who works in the mud  
    Who does not know peace  
    Who fights for a scrap of bread  
    Who dies because of a yes or a no.  
    Consider if this is a woman,  
    Without hair and without name  
    With no more strength to remember,  
    Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
    Like a frog in winter.  
Meditate that this came about:  
I commend these words to you.  
Carve them in your hearts  
At home, in the street,  
Going to bed, rising;  
Repeat them to your children,  
    Or may your house fall apart,  
    May illness impede you,  
    May your children turn their faces from you.

--Primo Levi  
*Survival in Auschwitz*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 11.

## Chapter 1

### A. Encountering the Other

The Shoah continues to make demands upon us. Auschwitz, as Maurice Blanchot tells us, makes a "ceaseless appeal" to us, an appeal which cannot be satisfied, where the accounts will never be balanced.<sup>2</sup> The horrible occurred there...but the articulation of this horror, the coming to grips with it, is in constant elusion. We are left with an unanswerable obligation, an infinite duty: to respond to the horrible, to respond to Auschwitz, the moment when the horrible became compulsive, when the horrible became routine.

We cite the entirety of Primo Levi's curse because Levi here names the demand, and not only his demand, but the demand of Shoah testimony. Levi calls us to consider the Other. "Consider if this is a man...": consider this man here, in the mud, scraping for food. He, too, is a man. This woman, without hair and with a cold womb: she, too, is a woman. And if you do not consider them, if you do not turn to them, "may your house fall apart...."

Levi's curse is the demand to face the Other. To turn ourselves toward this Other, toward the speaking of this Other. This pre-face, this fore-word, is the calling-us-toward-the-word of the Other, the turning of our faces toward the Other. Levi is opening the moment of responsibility, *making* the demand, thus his imperative tone.

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<sup>2</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Do Not Forget," from *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. and trans. by Michael Holland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995) 247.

"Consider if this is a man...": *this is a man*, a human, another human being, even here in the mud. As Robert Antelme says, "The SS cannot alter our species. They are themselves enclosed within the same humankind...."<sup>3</sup> This is a man: like the SS who deign to destroy him, this one in the mud is a human being. This one in the mud, this man: Levi opens the first door of responsibility.

But what is Levi calling us toward? Toward the telling, toward his telling, toward his testimony. The curse wrenches us toward his testimony. For he asks us to consider if this is a man, and this is, first of all, even before the first, even before the considering, a calling toward the Other. The curse is Levi making the demand of the Other, the demand to be *encountered*. And this is why it is a pre-face, a fore-word, for it comes before the word, before the telling. It calls us to turn and face the telling, this telling of Levi's experience of the ultimately horrible, which is still the experience of a man.

This encounter with the Other, what is it? It, too, is first and foremost a demand, the demand to respond. Levi's demand, the demand to encounter this Other, this man, is the demand, too, to bear witness, to bear out this telling. We must listen to the Other. But what would this listening be? What would this encounter be?

"The relation with the other is not...ontology," Emmanuel Levinas tells us.<sup>4</sup> Here we sense a radical formulation, because the

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston: The Marlboro Press/Northwestern, 1998) 74.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," *from Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Adrian T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi,

Other, if Levinas is correct, is not encountered in being, or at least the encounter cannot be reduced to being. Ontology, according to Levinas, is the reduction of the other to the same, the neutralization of alterity. Of Heideggerian ontology, he writes, "The understanding of a being...consist[s] in going beyond that being into the openness [of being] and in perceiving it *upon the horizon of being*."<sup>5</sup> The comprehension of a being, then, for Heidegger, is to understand that being within an overall framework or horizon. Thus, "To comprehend is to be related to the particular that only exists through knowledge, which is always knowledge of the universal."<sup>6</sup>

Levinas' critique of ontology rests on the commitment of ontology to neutralize alterity and reduce the other to the conditions of the same. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes, "The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same."<sup>7</sup> Ontology does not sustain a relation with the other as other (whatever that may be), but rather, neutralizes alterity in order to comprehend the existent. A certain economy of reduction is under way in ontology, an economy of violence.

Thus, even comprehension, which we might at first believe to be Levi's desired effect in his testimony (that we might *understand*), cannot be our encounter. As Blanchot says, "Even comprehension...is a

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trans. by Simon Critchley, Peter Atterton, and Graham Noctor (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 5. All emphases are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 45-6.

grasp that gathers the diverse into a unity, identifies the different, and brings the other back to the same through a reduction...."<sup>8</sup> To comprehend: to bring back under the unity of the same, to reduce alterity in the hopes of knowledge, etc. No, there is an even more fundamental encounter (we hesitate to even use the term fundamental), which is 'the encounter with the Other.

Levi's curse, as we have said, is his fore-word, the calling-us-toward-the-word of the Other. It is *saying* in the sense Levinas gives to the term: addressing the Other. Saying is "the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach...."<sup>9</sup> Here, the emphasis is not on content, not on the *said*, but on the very speaking, the saying, itself. This saying draws us toward the Other, commits us, as Levinas says, to an approach to the Other. Levi's curse is the demand to approach this other, this man, and this place called Auschwitz.

Near the opening of his essay "Enigma and Phenomenon," Levinas writes that the encounter with the Other is an "irreducible disturbance," a disturbance that cannot be reduced to an order.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Levinas tells us, "The Other can...not appear without renouncing his radical alterity, without entering into an order."<sup>11</sup> To appear is to participate in being, to enter into the openness of being, and thus to enter into the order of ontology. Thus, the Other as phenomenon, as he appears in being, loses all alterity.

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<sup>8</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 43.

<sup>9</sup> Levinas, "Essence and Disinterestedness," from *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Peperzak et al., trans. by Alphonso Lingis, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," from *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Peperzak et al., trans. by Alphonso Lingis, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

It is on these terms, too, that we must consider the temporality of this encounter. What would it mean to encounter the Other in the present? It would be precisely the neutralization of the Other, the reduction of alterity to the order of the same. To be encountered in the present is to participate in being, in the flow of time. The "irreducible disturbance," the encounter of the Other, cannot be reduced to the continuous flow of time or the participation in ontology because it would be subordinated in both instances to horizontal being. Rather, it must occur in some other time, an-other time in which the present of the Other is nevertheless this non-present. "[T]he past of the Other must never have been present."<sup>12</sup>

All of which means that the encounter must occur in an immemorial past. Intentionality, as phenomenology has envisaged it since Brentano, is always consciousness *of* something. But this "consciousness of" is an enclosing, encapsulating consciousness, always participating in being and the present. The encounter with the Other is never encapsulated, cannot be, and thus, cannot be an encounter within horizontal being, even if that horizon is the horizon of continuous time. Moreover, this encounter cannot be experienced by a subject as we normally think of one, for this would be the experiencing of the Other in ecstatic consciousness and thus in a present. The encounter with the Other overwhelms subjectivity and always occurs in an immemorial past. Thus, as opposed to the phenomenal, Levinas says, the way the Other has of "manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 70.



Levi's curse, which is the demand to face this horror we call Auschwitz, would be enigmatic in a similar way. The curse is saying, addressing the Other, and as Levinas says, "All speaking is an enigma."<sup>14</sup> Levi's fore-word is the call that demands we turn our faces toward this other, both Levi and the Shoah, the man himself and the place called Auschwitz. But this saying is enigmatic, it is preoriginal, for it calls us to face the Other anterior to, in this immemorial past, the order of the same. "Being excludes all alterity. It can leave nothing outside and cannot remain outside, cannot let itself be ignored."<sup>15</sup> The enigma, which would be the "irreducible disturbance" of Being, is the "proximity of the Other as Other," the approach of the Other.<sup>16</sup> Levi's curse calls us to face this Other, it is the aperture of his testimony. The opening of the Other. Consider if this is a man: consider this man, this Other....

Levi demands that we turn toward this Other, this testimony. We are asked to consider, to look into the eyes of the man in the mud, fighting for scraps of bread. This demand: what is it if not a call toward responsibility? A demand that we respond, and more, that we respond for this Other? But, as we have said earlier, the encounter with the Other does not leave the subject in its power, its mastery; in fact, the responsibility we have toward the Other, revealed in the encounter, is rooted in the destitution of the subject.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 74.

"[T]he I," Levinas writes, "is revealed as preeminently the same, is produced as a sojourn in the world."<sup>17</sup> The subject, for Levinas, is produced through its interaction in the world. Hence, dwelling becomes the mode of Levinas' conception of subjectivity, since in dwelling we find the concreteness of the same in an egoism. "Dwelling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself*...as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds *itself* up and *can*."<sup>18</sup> Having a home, a site, produces identification; in the site I am provided the means to sustain myself. As Heidegger, who made the term famous, says, "To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature."<sup>19</sup> And this takes on a special meaning for human beings: "[H]uman being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth."<sup>20</sup> The being of the human is to dwell, to dwell on the earth, wherein that being is preserved. It is the same idea for Levinas, for in dwelling, the subject is sustained and preserved in its subjectivity.

The power of subjectivity, its ability to sustain itself in dwelling, is thus an egoism. "The site, a medium, affords means," Levinas writes.<sup>21</sup> The means for what? To sustain the 'I,' the subject of power and mastery. But, it is important to note, this subjectivity is identification in terms of dwelling, of a site, and not of total

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<sup>17</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," from *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

coincidence with self (a formal identity). Which takes us to a further, more significant, point: the same and the other are not simply contradictory. This kind of formal alterity "by virtue of the common frontier...within the system, would yet be the same."<sup>22</sup> Formal alterity, the alterity of the contradiction, would be subsumed beneath the systematic eye of the same, and would thus be contained. The encounter with the Other, then, is by no means merely a contradiction, the encounter between mere opposites. Rather, it is a call to responsibility.

"The epiphany of the Absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me."<sup>23</sup> It is in the face to face, in the face of the Other, that the Other is revealed. Here there is no reference to the horizon, but the surpassing of all horizons. "What, then, is this encounter with the absolutely-other?" Jacques Derrida asks.

Neither representation, nor limitation, nor conceptual relation to the same. The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship. And first of all because the concept..., which is always *given to the other*, cannot encompass the other, cannot include the other....<sup>24</sup>

Why? Why is the concept unable to encompass the other? Because the Other remains an infinite distance from me, even in the closeness

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," from *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Peperzak et al., trans. by Tina Chanter, Nicholas Walker, and Simon Critchley, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," from *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978) 95.

of the face to face. In the bounds of knowledge (and we here intend the full meaning of the term 'bounds') the Other is subordinated to being, and thus to the same. Within the horizon of being, the Other is simply another existent, another being, and in no way free. But in the closeness of the face to face, the Other exceeds all limitations, since to limit the Other, to subordinate the Other, would be to violate the absolutely other.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in the relation of the face to face, which is really no relation, the Other remains an infinite distance from me because he exceeds all limitations that my being would impose on him. "Face to face with the other within a glance *and* a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt all totalities, this being-together as separation precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community."<sup>26</sup> It is this infinite distance that Levinas has in mind when he says that our relation with the Other is one of height.

The encounter with the Other, then, is an encounter with the infinite, an encounter which cannot be reduced to the order of the same. This is the relation of the "third kind" that Blanchot speaks of, the non-symmetrical relation. What founds this relation, Blanchot writes, is "no longer proximity--proximity of struggle, of services, of essence, of knowledge, or of recognition, not even of solitude--but rather the *strangeness* between us: a strangeness it will not suffice to characterize as a separation or even as a distance."<sup>27</sup> This is the revelation of the face as Levinas discusses it, the horizon-less encounter. Indeed, Blanchot calls this relation "Man without horizon"

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Derrida, 95.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>27</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 68.

because it is the pure encounter of man "not affirming himself on the basis of a horizon."<sup>28</sup> The pure exigency of the face.

The *exigency* of the face. As we said earlier, the face of the Other challenges and commands me. How so? Because the encounter with the Other puts me into question. "Instead of seizing the Other through comprehension...the I loses its hold before the absolutely Other, before the human Other, and, unjustified, can no longer be powerful."<sup>29</sup> The face of the Other rips a breach in the totality of the same, puts the totality in question. Before the absolutely other the 'I' of subjectivity comes into question. The face, the other, is that which cannot be totalized, thus putting my power in question.

Blanchot makes the point of the encounter occurring without horizon, since the horizon would only again bring the Other back under the theme of the same. Derrida emphasizes this point. "The other...is given 'in person' and without allegory only in the face," and further, "The face is not a metaphor, not a figure."<sup>30</sup> The face to face is a pure encounter, without recourse. Here, I am in immediate proximity to the Other, even while there exists an infinite distance between us. I am here stripped of all power.

In the face, the other is given over in person *as other*, that is, as that which does not reveal itself, as that which cannot be made thematic. I could not possibly speak of the Other, make of the Other a theme, pronounce the Other as object, in the accusative. I can only, I *must* only speak to the other; that is, I must call

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," 17.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, 100-01.

him in the vocative, which is not a category, a *case* of speech, but, rather the bursting forth, the very raising up of speech..... Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior, and forever discreet, interrupting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not "of this world." It is the origin of the world. I can speak *of it* only by speaking *to it*....<sup>31</sup>

The face cannot be thematized, cannot be woven into the totality of the same without thereby neutralizing alterity. Hence, to speak of it, as Derrida says, I must speak to it. The face calls me out to respond. It demands my speaking to it. As Blanchot says, "Speech affirms the abyss that there is between 'myself' and 'autrui,' and it passes over the impassable, but without abolishing or reducing it."<sup>32</sup> To speak to the Other is to approach the Other without neutralizing him.

It is thus, from the infinite height of the Other, that the face commands and challenges me. It in no way signifies anything, but rather commands a response. It is thus that Blanchot will say, "man facing man... has no choice but to speak or to kill."<sup>33</sup> I cannot face the Other and not respond, whether that response be murder, since murder is but the hate of the demand the face makes upon me, the violence of the same in its breached totality, unwilling to sacrifice itself for the Other. Speech, saying, the enigmatic, nonphenomenal, unrepresentable, and thus, always immemorial, approach that nevertheless is both close and infinitely distant, is the authentic

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>32</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 61.

response. The encounter with the Other occurs in this dangerous, impossible landscape.

### B. Welcoming the Other, Jewish humanism

Blanchot has sought in Judaism the affirmation of exile and nomadism, the affirmation of distance and proximity. Considered a negative condition, even an affliction, by many, Blanchot sees in Judaism the "foundation of our relationship to others"--a fundamentally ethical conception.<sup>34</sup> Nomadism, a perpetual relationship with exteriority, with alterity and the Other, becomes the basis for ethics. In Judaism Blanchot finds an other humanism.

Blanchot contrasts Jewish nomadism with paganism. "To be pagan," he tells us, "is to be fixed, to plant oneself in the earth, as it were, to establish oneself through a pact with the permanence that authorizes sojourn and is certified by the certainty in the land."<sup>35</sup> Paganism, riveted to a site, is ultimately power, for it is the site where the pagan dwells, that, as both Heidegger and Levinas tell us, preserves the freedom of the human being and provides him with means.<sup>36</sup> Paganism is rooted in power and thus allows subjectivity to flourish.

Nomadism, on the other hand, "answers to a relation that possession cannot satisfy."<sup>37</sup> Where paganism is rooted to the site,

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<sup>34</sup> Blanchot, "Do Not Forget," 245.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," from *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland, trans. by Susan Hanson, 230.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the preceding section.

<sup>37</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 230.

the site of power and possibility, nomadism answers to a different relation, a relation of difference. Nomadism is a relation with exile and exodus, with leaving the homeland, with never having a proper homeland. "To leave the homeland, yes; to come and go in such a way as to affirm the world as a passage.... The words exodus and exile indicate a positive relation with exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us."<sup>38</sup> What is proper to us in this sense? Paganism, "[O]ur power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I."<sup>39</sup> Nomadism, on the other hand, is the affirmation of the exteriority of the world, of exteriority itself.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>40</sup> An interesting connection to the work of Gilles Deleuze has done on Nietzsche's thought reveals itself here in Blanchot's discussion of nomadism. For Deleuze, Nietzsche has opened a new political possibility, and that possibility is essentially nomadic. He writes, "Philosophic discourse is born out of the imperial state, and it passes through innumerable metamorphoses, the same metamorphoses that lead us from the foundations of empire to the Greek city. Even within the Greek city-state, philosophic discourse remained in strict relation with the despot (or at least within the shadow of despotism), with imperialism.... But if Nietzsche does not belong to philosophy, it is perhaps because he was the first to conceive of another kind of discourse as counter-philosophy. This discourse is above all nomadic [and] its statements...[are] not the utterances of a rational, administrative machinery, whose philosophers would be bureaucrats of pure reason..." A thought from the Outside, as Blanchot might put it. The break with totality, for both Deleuze and Blanchot, is nomadic. But the comparison runs deeper, for both thinkers see in this break a kind of politics of the Outside. Deleuze writes, "We also know that the problem for revolutionaries today is to unite within the purpose of the particular struggle without falling into the despotic and bureaucratic organization of the party or state apparatus. We seek...a nomadic unit related to the outside that will not revive an internal despotic unity." Nomadism as the perpetual break with totalities. And Blanchot writes, "[A]ffirm the break.... The break with the powers that be, hence with the notion of power, hence everywhere that power predominates." Nomadism as the root of a politics of the outside, a politics that does not reconstruct itself as a state apparatus, but, rather, always fires at despotism from the outside, always de-constructs itself. A discussion of nomadism should not overlook this kind of political possibility. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, "Nomad Thought," from *The New Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by



Nomadism thus puts the site in question; it always refers to a beyond. "Exodus and exile," Blanchot tells us, "express simply the same reference to the Outside that the word existence bears."<sup>41</sup> Beyond being, outside being: existence is the ecstasy of existence. "[I]f to become rooted in a culture and in a regard for things does not suffice," Blanchot proposes:

it is because the order of the realities in which we become rooted does not hold the key to all the relations to which we must respond. [In opposition to the pagan order of things and truth], there is another dimension revealed to man where, beyond every horizon, he must relate to what is beyond his reach. <sup>42</sup>

Nomadism is the putting into question of the pagan site, and thus opens us to another dimension. But this dimension is "beyond every horizon," that is, it occurs within no horizon. What are these relations that exceed the pagan horizon? They are our relations with others.

For Blanchot, being Jewish means much more than the negative conditions of suffering and persecution. It is an "exigency of strangeness," the demand to bear out the stranger.<sup>43</sup> As Edmond Jabes says, "Jewish solidarity is the impossible passion one stranger can feel for another."<sup>44</sup> The Jew has always been the stranger, the

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David B. Allison (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985), and Blanchot, "Disorderly Words," from *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. and trans. by Michael Holland (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 232.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 232-3.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>44</sup> Edmond Jabes, *The Book of Yudel*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985) 32.

nomad, and thus it should be no surprise that Blanchot finds the Jew to be the aperture to this relation. The other humanism Blanchot proposes rests on the encounter with the Other, the encounter that Jewish nomadism and being Jewish opens.

What, Blanchot asks, is the gift of Israel? The teaching of the one God. But this is not the heart of what Judaism has taught, Blanchot says. Rather, he responds, "[W]hat we owe to Jewish monotheism is not the revelation of the one God, but the revelation of speech as the place where men hold themselves in relation with what excludes all relation: the Infinitely Distant, the absolutely Foreign. God speaks, and man speaks to him."<sup>45</sup> For Blanchot, the heart of this humanism, of this Jewish humanism (as opposed to Greek or pagan humanism), is speech as the impossible relation. The impossible relation because it brings us into relation with what is infinitely distant, which "excludes all relation."<sup>46</sup> The communion with God, and ultimately, the community of Jews, is sustained in speech, which does not reduce distance but rather sustains it while nevertheless bringing us into relations.

"Distance," Blanchot tells us, "is not abolished, it is not even diminished; on the contrary, it is maintained, preserved in its purity by the rigour of the speech that upholds the absoluteness of difference."<sup>47</sup> Speech is the mode of proximity, that is, in speech, what is proximal is preserved in its distance without being appropriated or assimilated. It is addressing what is different

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<sup>45</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 233.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 233.

without reducing that difference. Speech and address are preserves of distance.

Let us acknowledge that Jewish thought does not know, or refuses, mediation and speech as mediating. But its importance is precisely in teaching us that speaking inaugurates an original relation in which the terms involved do not have to atone for this relation or disavow themselves in favour of a measure supposed to be common; they rather ask and are accorded reception precisely by reason of that which they do not have in common.<sup>48</sup>

In speaking, the Other is preserved and not reduced to a totality. The address *addresses the Other*; it is not a speech of power but a mode of address, of calling toward. "To speak to someone is to accept not introducing him into the system of things or of beings to be known," Blanchot says. Rather, "[I]t is to recognize him as unknown and to receive him as foreign without obliging him to break with his difference."<sup>49</sup> Thus, even this preservation is poorly named if we assume by it a measure of power in the addressee: it is not the power of preservation, but the *welcoming* of the Other in all his otherness.

Thus, nomadism and speech would be a kind of welcoming and receiving. Speech welcomes the Other in all his otherness, and nomadism affirms this relation with exteriority. When Levinas tells us that our relation with the Other is one of height, of infinite distance, Blanchot reads this, correctly, as a relation with the infinite, and speech sustains this relation. The Other (is) an enigma in

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 233.

Levinas' sense of the term, that is, the Other disrupts being and ontology. As such, the Other is infinitely distant from me, and it is with this infinite distance that I am now in relation. Judaism, for Blanchot, has always recognized this infinity, has always been in this relation because of its monotheism. Nomadism, thus, is the affirmation of this relation, and speech is its landscape. "Speech," Blanchot tells us, "is the promised land where exile fulfills itself in sojourn since it is not a matter of being at home there but of being always Outside, engaged in a movement wherein the Foreign offers itself, yet without disavowing itself."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Blanchot proposes a "Jewish humanism," which is to be distinguished from Greek humanism "by a concern with human relations so preponderant that, even when God is nominally present, it is still a question of man; of what there is between man and man when nothing brings them together or separates them but themselves."<sup>51</sup> The God of Israel, the monotheism of the Jews, opens onto the distance between human beings, but in such a fashion as to welcome what is distant, to welcome the Other in his destitution and destruction. Greek humanism, the humanism of ontology, neutralizes alterity, and thus the Other is never welcome unless cloaked and reduced to the order of the same. But in Jewish humanism the Other is welcomed in his otherness, addressed in speech, affirmed in his difference. It is thus that Blanchot says:

Jews are not different from other men in the way racism would have us believe; they

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 233-4.

rather bear witness, as Levinas says, to this relation with difference that the human face...reveals to us and entrusts to our responsibility; not strangers, but recalling us to the exigency of strangeness; not separated by an incomprehensible retribution, but designating as pure separation and as pure relation what, from man to man, exceeds human power--which is nonetheless capable of anything.<sup>52</sup>

And as Edmond Jabes says, "The salvation of the Jewish people lies in severance, in solidarity at the heart of severance."<sup>53</sup>

Levi's curse opens this aperture, demands that it be faced, that we take our place and assume our responsibility. To face the Shoah, to approach the suffering of Others, to enter into this community bound by nomadism: these are Levi's demands. Nomadism means to leave behind what we know and possess, to forget the land where it is safe and warm and to turn toward the exterior, toward what is other. Levi's curse calls us to face the horror, to look at this man fighting for scraps, and to recognize that we are bound to him.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>53</sup> Edmond Jabes, *The Book of Questions*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1972) 100.

## Chapter 2

### A. Event without horizon

Levi's curse calls us to face his testimony, to face the destruction of human beings at Auschwitz. It is the fore-word, in the preoriginal sense Levinas gives to the term, because it calls us toward the word of the Other. Levi's demand is the demand to encounter the other, to encounter the horrible, to encounter Auschwitz. The ceaseless appeal of Auschwitz is realized in the curse. It draws us into the impossible proximity of one to the other.

This proximity, as we have seen in Levinas' study of the face to face, is an absolute encounter, since it occurs anterior to any horizon and without mediation: it is pure encounter. It is absolute in the sense of non-solubility. Thus, when Blanchot tells us that the Shoah is "*the absolute event of history*," he has this meaning in mind: the Shoah is not soluble, is not reducible.<sup>54</sup> Auschwitz cannot be reduced to a sensible moment on a familiar continuum, calculable, say, in a causal series. It is itself the horizon, which is subordinated to no other.

This theme recurs in Shoah testimony. Inmates found themselves unable to transcend their reality toward some other. The entire horizon became day-to-day survival, and envisioning life beyond it became impossible. The reality of the camp was total, an impenetrable wall. Certainly, there was the hope of freedom, of

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<sup>54</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 47.

liberation and a return to homes and families, but in no way did these hopes sustain the inmates. And further, these hopes most often took the form of desires felt most intensely within the camp. Hence, inmates relate that they dreamed almost nightly of large meals and warm baths, even cigarettes and coffee. But for the majority of the inmates; what Levi calls the "backbone of the camp," there was nothing beyond immediate hunger and pain.

[T]hey, the Muselmanner, the drowned...an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.<sup>55</sup>

The drowned, as Levi calls them, are unable to fear even their own death; for them there is only the immediacy of existence: hunger, pain, affliction.

Jean Amery, though in no way a Muselmann, nevertheless relates a similar experience. Returning from work one evening, Amery's attention is caught by a flag waving in the wind in front of a building. "'The walls stand speechless and cold, the flags clank in the wind,' I muttered to myself in mechanical association," Amery writes.<sup>56</sup> Amery remembers how the stanza used to affect him.

Then I repeated the stanza somewhat louder,  
listened to the words sound, tried to track the

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<sup>55</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Amery, "At the Mind's Limits," from *At the Mind's Limits*, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) 7.

rhythm, and expected that the emotional and mental response that for years this Holderlin poem had awakened in me would emerge. But nothing happened. The poem no longer transcended reality. There it was and all that remained was objective statement: such and such, and the Kapo roars "left," and the soup was watery, and the flags are clanking in the wind.<sup>57</sup>

For Amery, there is no longer a transcendence in the line, only the the camp itself. Yes, the flag clanks in the wind, here, in Auschwitz. It does not lift him beyond the walls of the camp, but somehow is exhausted in the camp itself.

Auschwitz became, in this sense, a kind of unsurpassable horizon. It was not merely a place, but a world, and a totalized world at that. The Holderlin line is deflated completely in the camp. Charlotte Delbo, too, discusses this point. She writes, "When I would recite a poem [Delbo was known in the camp for her literary background, and much loved because of it], when I would tell the comrades beside me what a novel or a play was about while we went on digging in the muck of the swamp, it was to keep myself alive...to remain me, to make sure of it. Never did that succeed in nullifying the moment I was living through, not for an instant."<sup>58</sup> Here, as for Amery, there is no aesthetic transcendence, not even momentary conciliation. "Reality was right there, killing. There was no possible getting away from it."<sup>59</sup> These moments are what we might call

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>58</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory*, trans. by Rosette Lamont (Marlboro, Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1990) 2.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2.



anarchic, since they neither stem from the reality they arise in nor do they dissolve into it: they arise as moments of an-archic defiance.

Delbo asks herself if she is "living with Auschwitz?" She responds, "No, I live next to it. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise...."<sup>60</sup> "I live within a twofold being. The Auschwitz double doesn't bother me.... As though it weren't I at all. Without this split I would not have been able to revive."<sup>61</sup> For Delbo, her being has been split in two *so that* she might return to so-called "ordinary" life. But, as she says, Auschwitz remains, it is "there, unalterable, precise." It remains totally isolated from the rest of her life, a horizon so impenetrable that she had to split in order to continue on.

It is thus that Auschwitz was its own horizon. The event Auschwitz, the Shoah, as for these survivors, remains an impenetrable wall, indissoluble. The experience remains hard, in memory. To have lived through the camps, for Delbo, meant the necessity to split into two different beings. It was impossible to place the event within another horizon; to do so would be to subordinate the ultimate to the everyday, to the common. And this tendency is a constant struggle in testimony, a struggle against the audience's tendency to reduce, to identify, and to accept.

In her first memoir of the camps, *None of Us Will Return*, Delbo attempts to confine this trend by addressing the audience outright. While narrating aspects of life in the camps, she also explores the limits of the reader's ability to understand, even to hear, her words. A dangerous fault line opens between narrative and knowledge,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 3.

between words and understanding; a space begins to develop which the reader both occupies and cannot occupy.

"O you who know," Delbo writes, "did you know...."<sup>62</sup> O you who know, O reader who knows...who thinks he knows...who thinks it is possible to know: these are Delbo's accusations, cloaked as questions. Of course, we do not know. The knowledge Delbo possesses, useless knowledge, as she calls it, is an immediate knowledge, a burning or a scarring, not textbook knowledge. "O you who know" means nothing more than you don't know, couldn't possibly know. And yet she asks us to know, to attempt to understand.

Delbo strives in her narrative to exteriorize the knowledge she is communicating. Writing in vignettes, as so many survivors do, Delbo often punctuates and interrupts her narratives by somehow disrupting the reader. At one point in her memoir she relates the story of a woman who, driven by thirst, breaks ranks and runs for water. Delbo, paradoxically, weaves a beautiful prose poem that roams over the "white plain" while still relating the terrifying events leading to the woman's death. Near the middle of the vignette, however, Delbo abruptly interrupts her narrative to tell us "Presently I am writing this story in a cafe--it is turning into a story."<sup>63</sup> Delbo exteriorizes the narrative by temporally displacing both herself, as narrator, and the reader: we are suddenly pulled out of the text and into a Parisian cafe. The first person plural, the most common voice in Shoah memoirs, suddenly flees beyond the horizon.

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<sup>62</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *None of Us Will Return*, from *Auschwitz and After*, trans. by Rosette C. Lamont (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

'We' is ever so far over there. She ends the vignette by writing, "And now I am sitting in a cafe, writing this text."<sup>64</sup>

The most profound example of this exteriorization, though, comes late in the text. While digging one day, two of Delbo's friends die. After carrying the bodies back to the camp, the women stand at roll call. "Throughout the roll call, we never looked at them. A corpse. The left eye devoured by a rat. The other open with its fringe of lashes." But here she pauses, and then writes, "Try to look. Just try and see."<sup>65</sup> She addresses the reader explicitly, challenging the reader to "try to see." The event that she has just narrated she now banishes from the reader: you cannot see this, you cannot understand this. She openly questions the ability of the reader to grasp this event. In her challenge lies the exteriorization of the event, it puts the entire narrative in question. Delbo works to maintain the singularity of the event by exteriorizing her narrations with regard to the reader. She tells her story and then declares that it cannot be understood. While narrating her experiences, she is also revealing the problematics of testimony and bearing witness, attempting to open a space in which the reader might, rather than attempting to integrate the Shoah into historical consciousness, recognize this new catastrophe. It is as if Delbo's real subject is not her experience of life in Auschwitz but, rather, the question of bearing witness to that experience.

Delbo recognizes a central problem in testimony: while the event, for the survivor, remains a singular one (it is a horizon unto

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 84.

itself), the audience immediately contextualizes and appropriates the testimony, drawing inferences and conclusions. The irreducible is reduced, placed within a horizon, mediated. But this is not an act of aggression on the part of the audience, that is to say, the audience is here not to be held strictly accountable for this *phenomenon*. And this is precisely the point, the *testifying* becomes *testimony*, becomes phenomenal. As Levinas says, the "subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands."<sup>66</sup> That for every speaking there is a said, a content, is the price for that speaking. It manifests itself, and as such, is reduced to the order of the same. "In language qua said, everything is translated before us, be it at the price of a betrayal."<sup>67</sup>

This betrayal is Delbo's theme, we may even say, nemesis, through much of her writing. The attempt to exteriorize her narratives is an attempt to fend off this betrayal. The reader is left with testimony with which in no way is he or she comfortable, even beyond the sheer horror of the content. The position of the reader is complicated, thematized and put into question. It stands and falls on the approach to the work, on the wholeness of the work and the work's "unto itself-ness."

Thus, we come back to Blanchot's complicated phrase, "*the holocaust--the absolute event of history....*"<sup>68</sup> The Shoah, this horizon-less event, nevertheless occurs within history, the totalizing

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<sup>66</sup> Levinas, "Essence and Disinterestedness," 112.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>68</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 47.

horizon. We thus have histories, studies, graphs, figures, statistics: all to relate the immensity of the destruction, how it took place, who perpetrated it, and its roots in past historical trends. And all, also, to place the event within larger contexts, to provide horizons of meaning in order to understand. But survivors continually struggle against this contextualizing, against any subordination of the Shoah to a theme. As Lawrence L. Langer notes, survivors often feel their descriptions of life in the camps are "totally inadequate" and cannot "convey the enormity of the event."<sup>69</sup> Here, as Delbo knows, there is a sense of betrayal.

But this betrayal is the price of the Shoah's phenomenality. It occurred: this fact returns again and again. The Shoah was a moment in history, and yet it is the encounter with the ultimate, the singular. If God, as Levinas says, cannot be encountered within the world, the Shoah would be the opposite. Total affliction, immediate pain, living hunger: the creation of the society of the Musselmanner, a society without horizon, living in the non-present presence of pain and hunger. Ab-solute: referring to no horizon, irreducible.

It is thus that bearing witness has come to signify Shoah testimony. The inscription over the entrance to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in the words of Elie Wiesel, reads, "For the the dead *and* the living, we must bear witness." The survivor feels a responsibility to be heard, to tell what happened. To tell the story, as if nothing else could be done, no explaining and no balancing of the accounts.

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 61.

## B. Suffering

The Shoah is an event without horizon. The words of Jean Amery and Charlotte Delbo, and the society of the Muselmänner, testify to this. The inability to transcend, to overcome, the camp, the hunger, the pain, all indicate that the universe of the camp was one unto itself, a domain that was self-enclosed. Marked by a burning immediacy, the suffering at the heart of the Shoah nullified all horizons.

Horizons are the source of continuity. Phenomenology has always understood this, that is, has always understood that any understanding occurs against the horizon. Indeed, we can make a plea to the German language to make this point clear. 'Object,' in German, is 'gegenstand,' literally, to 'stand against.' Thus, an object is always understood *against* the horizon beyond it. As Heidegger says, "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon...."<sup>70</sup> It is only against the horizon that presence is encountered.

But this recognizing of presence is a mode of power. Levinas writes: "An existent is comprehended in the measure that thought transcends it, measuring it against the horizon whereupon it is profiled."<sup>71</sup> The horizon, the against-which, allows for the comprehension, the apprehension, of the existent. It affords a

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<sup>70</sup> Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," 154.

<sup>71</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

medium wherein the thing can be comprehended. Thus, the horizon allows for power. It allows the comprehension of the thing, the existent, because it determines the parameters of the encounter. When Levinas says (with Heidegger), "Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being," he implies this relation of power.<sup>72</sup> The existent is neutralized in the encounter, and the horizon allows for this neutralization. Thus, the horizon, for Heideggerian phenomenology, works to contextualize the existent.

"Suffering," Blanchot writes:

is suffering when one can no longer suffer it, and when, because of this non-power, one cannot cease suffering it. A singular situation. Time is as though arrested, merged with its interval. There, the present is without end, separated from every other present by an inexhaustible and empty infinite, the very infinite of suffering, and thus dispossessed of any future: a present without end and yet impossible as a present.<sup>73</sup>

This suffering occurs without horizon. In torture, the victim's suffering is measured, gauged, in order to *keep the victim there*, that is, in order to *maintain* the victim *through* the suffering so that information might be forced out of him. Torture is thus a suffering which occurs within a horizon: a measured, calculated suffering. But the suffering Blanchot describes has already passed over into another time. It is the suffering of the Muselmanner, the drowned, the anonymous mass that forms the "backbone of the camp." Broken, annihilated: the Muselmanner *are* this suffering. As Levi says, "One

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>73</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 44.

hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death...."<sup>74</sup> They are stripped of all identity and power, even the power to suffer, to *undergo* their suffering.

"The present of suffering," Blanchot tells us, "is the abyss of the present, indefinitely hollowed out and in this hollowing indefinitely distended, radically alien to the possibility that one might be present to it through the mastery of presence."<sup>75</sup> In suffering, the present of suffering nullifies any horizon. Indeed, if the horizon is the source of power, against which one *can comprehend*, then the present of suffering has no such horizon. The Muselmanner, unable to appropriate their suffering as their own, slip into anonymity. Stripped of their identity, stripped by suffering, they are turned over to another time, this present without presence, a present without horizon, wherein there is only suffering. When Levi says that the Muselmanner "are already too empty to really suffer," Blanchot would agree.<sup>76</sup> He writes, suffering "is a question not of that paroxysmic state where the self cries out and is torn apart, but rather of a suffering that is almost indifferent, not suffered, but neutral (*a phantom of suffering*) insofar as the one who is exposed to it, precisely through this suffering, is deprived of the 'I' that would make him suffer it [my emphases]."<sup>77</sup> It is the suffering through which the self, subjectivity, etc., cannot be sustained. It is "not...the

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<sup>74</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

<sup>75</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 44.

<sup>76</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.

<sup>77</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 44-5.



trial of experience, but rather that trial from which we can no longer escape."<sup>78</sup>

This suffering cannot be escaped. It is the experience of strangeness, of alterity. The horizon provides distance, a background, against which we can comprehend the existent. In horrified fascination the existent overwhelms the subject and the horizon. But in suffering, the horizon is nullified not by an existent, but rather through the experience from which no distance can be taken. The horizon, for subjectivity, would allow some distance wherein the appropriation of suffering could occur, but here "it is so close that we are prohibited from taking any distance from it--it is foreign in its very proximity."<sup>79</sup> As Blanchot says, we have a word for this, a word that designates this proximity: immediacy. "[T]he immediate that allows no mediation, the absence of separation that is absence of relation as well as infinite separation because this separation does not reserve for us the distance and the future we need in order to be able to relate ourselves to it, to come about in it."<sup>80</sup> This suffering is burning immediacy.

In nullifying the horizon, suffering, the suffering of the Muselmanner (but also the suffering that is, in an important sense, the Shoah) disrupts all contextualization and continuity. As Blanchot says, suffering takes away our ability to relate to ourselves through the future, thus cutting off any sense of continuity. Suffering occurs within a non-present present, the present of proximity to the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 45

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 45.

strange, and thus can never be fully recuperated or brought back into a continuum that would make sense of it all. It is an immemorial past, a disturbance in the order of things. It is pure in its immediacy.

Thus, when Blanchot says, "He who has been the contemporary of the camps is forever a survivor: death will not make him die," we must recognize the interminability of the Shoah.<sup>81</sup> For survivors, even (for Blanchot) for contemporaries of the camps, the mode of surviving is not one that can be overcome. This suffering cannot be transcended. It can be broken, much like a trance can be broken, but it cannot be appropriated. It is suffering without end, an interminable presence, a presence, as he says, that is distended. This suffering cannot be overcome by power, cannot be contextualized or wrought to fit into a continuum. It persists, like the *il y a*, always working and un-working beneath projects, always nullifying the horizon.

The Shoah continues to destroy. We must learn this. Its horror persists. To date the end of the destruction with the "liberation" of the camps is foolish and assuming. In an effort to combat this false conclusion, Levi writes:

In the majority of the cases, the hour of liberation was neither joyful nor lighthearted. For most it occurred against a tragic background of destruction, slaughter, and suffering. Just as they felt they were again becoming men, that is, responsible, the sorrows of men returned: the sorrow of the

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<sup>81</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 143.

dispersed or lost family; the universal suffering all around; their own exhaustion, which seemed definitive, past cure; the problems of a life to begin all over again amid the rubble, often alone. Not "pleasure the son of misery," but misery the son of misery.<sup>82</sup>

For Levi, the "liberation" may not be aptly named if it intends a sense of the end of the Shoah. Suffering continued, and Levi's essay is about a kind of suffering that persisted long after the rubble had been cleared and people had either returned to their home or built a new one: the suffering of shame. The moment the SS left Auschwitz, when the dogs were removed, when the Russians arrived, when one found one's home again: not one of these moments marks the end of this suffering. It persists.

The suffering that is the Shoah cannot be transcended, cannot be appropriated. It occurs without horizon, outside contextualization and continuity. But what does this really mean? That the Shoah, while a date in history, a date that can be marked and pointed to, is also outside history. Outside history? Outside the narrative that is history, the appropriation that is history. The continuity embodied in history, the power that *is* history, cannot appropriate the Shoah. Suffering is always immemorial, always already past, and thus, cannot enter into discourse.

Suffering, Blanchot tells us, delivers us "over to another time--to time as other, as absence and neutrality; precisely to a time that

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<sup>82</sup> Levi, "Shame," from *The Drowned and The Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 70-1.

can no longer redeem us, that constitutes no recourse.”<sup>83</sup> What would this redemption be, if it were possible? The contextualization of suffering, suffering undergone within history. For Blanchot, this suffering is marked by its neutrality, the suspension of beings in existence--it is affliction. To history we have no recourse, since it cannot account for this suffering. Affliction "has lost time altogether. It is the horror of a suffering without end, a suffering time can no longer redeem, that has escaped time and for which there is no longer recourse; it is irremediable.”<sup>84</sup> In affliction we are delivered over to another time, and to history and time as continuum we can no longer appeal.

Blanchot relates a story about a young man forced to work directly in the extermination process. He writes, "[H]e had suffered the worst, led his family to the crematorium, hanged himself; after being saved at the last moment--how can one say that: *saved?*--he was exempted from contact with dead bodies, but when the SS shot someone, he was obliged to hold the victim's head.”<sup>85</sup> The young prisoner has indeed suffered. Blanchot goes on:

When asked how he could bear this, he is supposed to have answered that he "observed the comportment of men before death." I will not believe it. As Lewental, whose notes were found buried near a crematorium, wrote to us, "The truth was always more atrocious, more tragic than what will be said about it." Saved at the last minute, the young man of whom I speak was forced to live that last instant

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<sup>83</sup> Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 44.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>85</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 82.

again and each time to live it once more, frustrated every time of his own death and made to exchange it every time for the death of all. His response...was not a response; he could not respond. What remains for us to recognize in this account is that when he was faced with an impossible question, he could find no other alibi than the search for knowledge, the so-called dignity of knowledge....<sup>86</sup>

For Blanchot, it is unbelievable that the humanistic notion of the dignity of those facing death actually sustained the young prisoner. In fact, we, too, must question this notion. If testimony has taught us anything about death in the camps, it is that life was accorded no dignity, and death even less. Those being led to their death usually did not even know they were going to die (the best example here being the gas chambers, which were disguised as showers). But Blanchot is questioning the survivor's account only by default; the error, he holds, lies in the question. The survivor cannot account for how he survived, how he could bear this horror, and by putting this "impossible question" to him, we force him to come up with an "alibi."

Blanchot's point is that affliction (the affliction of suffering, the affliction of surviving) can only enter into discourse pedantically, which is to say, it cannot enter into discourse. If Nietzsche's work should teach us anything, Pierre Klossowski might say, then it is this: the singular cannot be expressed, for expression belongs to the gregarious, to prostitution.<sup>87</sup> In order to respond, the survivor must

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), esp. chapters 2 and 4.

capitulate, in some sense, to the expectations put upon him. Discourse, thus, cannot capture affliction, affliction would be its other. It thus lies outside discourse, outside power, and outside any "why"--any reasons we may put forth for it. It is an-archic, it has no source, and the history that gives rise to it cannot account for it.

As an historical event, an event with a date, we can approach the Shoah geographically, perhaps even topologically. We can number the camps, list the dead, describe the processes of destruction. We can narrate the events, expose the Nazi bureaucracy, and try and execute the criminals. But it is never enough. We cannot redeem it; history cannot redeem it, because it is an interruption of history. It is the "absolute event," as Blanchot says, and as such, it is forever other, the other for discourse and the other for us. At the end of his aphorism discussing the young prisoner at Auschwitz, Blanchot writes, "The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know."<sup>88</sup> Or as Charlotte Delbo says, "Try to look. Just try and see."

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<sup>88</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 82.

## Chapter 3

### A. Gascar and the "Season of the Dead"

The SS waged a war against ceremonialized death; it was, of course, one of their central weapons in the dehumanization process. Robert Antelme notes this in *The Human Race*. Interned in a non-Jewish labor camp, Antelme returns from work one day to find two men carrying the corpse of a dead Frenchman under the eyes of an SS sentry. "Three men: two guys to carry the dead man, and the sentry," he writes. "One more and it would have been a ceremony. The SS wouldn't have permitted it. The dead mustn't be allowed to serve as a symbol for us."<sup>89</sup> The ceremony would bring the prisoners together, perhaps stirring sentiments of camaraderie and national pride (most of the prisoners were French): dangers to the dehumanization process. "Like our sleeping, like our pissing, our natural death is tolerated, but no trace of it may be left behind, either in memory or in space. There must be no way of situating the place where a dead man lies."<sup>90</sup> The ceremony must be abolished for the dehumanization process to succeed.

The cemetery, in the "ordinary" world, functions as a site and a means for preserving identity. The dead are "laid to rest" in a marked grave, strewn with flowers, tended with care. The funeral is a means of weaving the death of a loved one into the consciousness of those left behind. As Heidegger says, the rituals of death are

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<sup>89</sup> Antelme, 92.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 92.

"tranquillization[s] not only for him who is 'dying' but just as much for those who 'console' him."<sup>91</sup> Death, here, is ceremonialized. It is not anonymous, but consoling, reassuring. It is ritualized, and the ritual embodies continuity.

In Pierre Gascar's "The Season of the Dead," Gascar tells the story of a group of French prisoners of war who tend such a cemetery. Caught up in the pretenses of ceremony in the cemetery, the prisoners manage to sustain a meaningful existence through the rituals of death. Their cemetery has meandering paths, planted flowers, and green grass. Here the dead are not stuffed into crematoria or thrown into mass graves, but, rather, are gently laid to rest. But the prisoners' fragile world is threatened: deportation trains pass the camp on a regular basis. Forced to witness the destruction of a people and finally, to face atrocity directly, the quiet, ceremonialized life of the prisoners dissolves.

As the tenders of the graveyard, the prisoners maintain a certain distance from the destruction occurring all around them.

In the graveyard we led that orderly  
existence depicted in old paintings and, even  
more, in old tapestries and mosaics. A man  
sitting beside a clump of anemones, another  
cutting grass with a scythe; water, and  
somebody lying flat on his belly drinking, and  
somebody else with his eyes turned skyward,  
drawing water in a yellow jug....<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 298.

<sup>92</sup> Pierre Gascar, "The Season of the Dead," from *Art from the Ashes*, ed. by Lawrence L. Langer, trans. by Jean Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 433.



The prisoners maintain a sense of dwelling where they are in touch with the natural world and perform meaningful work. Here the pastoral sentiments seem a return to an innocent simplicity. Indeed, Gascar refers to the graveyard as the "only innocent place" and describes the prisoners finding there a "sort of immunity."<sup>93</sup>

But their immunity is quickly destroyed. As the SS begin to arrive in the province in order to deport and kill the local Jews and dissidents, the prisoners seek refuge increasingly often in the graveyard. And then one day, while attempting to dig a trench to divert water, the narrator strikes a decomposing corpse with his spade. Terrified, the prisoners try to bury it again. One of them suggests making a cross of branches, and they move on to another location to dig their trench. But now the corpses are uncovered rapidly. First one, then three more are revealed. The prisoners have opened a mass grave, and the civilian clothing suggests these dead were Jews.

"I was overwhelmed by the somber horror of it and the truth it revealed," the narrator says.

This was death--these liquefying muscles, this half-eaten eye, those teeth like a dead sheep's; death, no longer decked with grasses, no longer ensconced in the coolness of a vault, no longer sepulchred in stone, but sprawling in a bog full of bones, wrapped in a drowned man's clothes, with its hair caught in the earth.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 453.

Here, where death puts on a sacred mask, the horror of atrocity and mass murder rears its head, and the sanctity of the graveyard is destroyed. The totality of the same, embodied in the graveyard, is here put in question by atrocity. Ceremonialized death has served the prisoners as their "innocent place," a kind of security against the terrors of war and the catastrophe being wrought on the Jews. The cemetery has become for the prisoners a site in the sense Levinas gives to that term. "Dwelling," Levinas writes, "is the very mode of *maintaining oneself*...as the body that...holds *itself* up and *can*.... The site, a medium, affords means."<sup>95</sup> But, confronted with the corpses in the mass grave, the prisoners can no longer turn away. All security is destroyed. This was death, our narrator says, and it is not the death of the funeral or wake but mass murder, the corpses relegated to an unmarked grave. Overwhelmed, the narrator admits his inability to cope with the situation. He is horrified.

"The look...finds," Blanchot says, "in what makes it possible, the power that neutralizes it...."<sup>96</sup> The subject is overwhelmed. In the narrator's horror, the corpse, the existent, neutralizes the subject, but it also nullifies the horizon. The existent, the corpse, puts the entire meaning of the cemetery in question. Whereas the cemetery, as Gascar points out, reveals an idyllic sense of communion with nature, and undoubtedly with ancestry, the mass grave, covered over, hidden by the perpetrators, makes no such reference. "In

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<sup>95</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37.

<sup>96</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) 32.

fascination," Gerald Bruns writes, "everything is withdrawn from the world...."<sup>97</sup>

"Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance."<sup>98</sup> The gaze, "properly speaking," would be power, much like Foucault's panoptic gaze. But here the gaze of power is neutralized, overwhelmed. It is reduced to proximity: both a closeness and a distance. We would like to call it height in Levinas' sense of the term, but here the Other is destroyed, mutilated. The horror of this fascination is rooted in this recognition. As Heidegger notes, the corpse is not a thing like other things, "This something which is just-present-at-hand-and-no-more is 'more' than a *lifeless* material Thing. In it we encounter something *unalive*, which has lost its life."<sup>99</sup> The destruction of the Other, in the fascination atrocity demands, opens onto the neutral. "Fascination," Blanchot writes, "is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone."<sup>100</sup> The anonymity of the destroyed Other, found in the mass grave amid the murdered, opens the subject, which is now no longer a subject, to the neutral. As Levinas says, "Horror is somehow a movement which

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<sup>97</sup> Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 60.

<sup>98</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 33.

<sup>99</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

<sup>100</sup> Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 33.

will strip consciousness of its very subjectivity."<sup>101</sup> Anonymous being, the faceless Someone: the horror of atrocity.

The encounter opens, thus, onto what Blanchot calls the neutral and what Levinas calls the *il y a*, the *there is*. Levinas characterizes the *il y a* as this "impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself.... The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is 'being in general.'"<sup>102</sup> But this is no longer being as space or time, as "receptable for objects, as a means of access to beings"--it is not Heidegger's being in which all things participate.<sup>103</sup> It is, rather, the murmur of the being of the void, that which is there when nothing is there, the rumble in the night. It is a "universal absence [which] is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence."<sup>104</sup> It is, as Levinas says, "like the monotonous presence that bears down on us in insomnia."<sup>105</sup>

Horror opens us to the *il y a*. In horror, as in fascination (for, as Bruns points out, horror is "...the highest form of fascination..."), the subject is neutralized, depersonalized. "Horror," Levinas tells us, "is nowise an anxiety about death."<sup>106</sup> Rather, "...horror turns the subjectivity of the subject...inside out. It is a participation in the *there is*...in the *there is* that has 'no exits.'"<sup>107</sup> Horror neutralizes the

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<sup>101</sup> Levinas, "There is: Existence without Existents," from *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1989) 32.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 33.

subject. But here subjectivity undergoes yet another transformation: in the neutralization of the subject, passivity ensues. It is for this reason that we must stay close to Blanchot's term 'fascination' since it implies the sense of passivity of the *il y a* and the neutral. As Levinas says, horror does not lull consciousness into unconsciousness, but throws it into "an *impersonal vigilance, a participation....*"<sup>108</sup> Horror opens the subject to passivity.

It is this horror that Gascar's prisoners try to work against. After uncovering the mass grave, they attempt to "embroider" over the corpses, in an effort to dismiss the atrocity. "On the fringe of the war, on the fringe of the massacres, on the fringe of Europe, sheltering behind our prodigious burial-ground, we seemed like hollow-eyed gardeners, sitters in the sun, fanatical weeders, busily working over the dead as over some piece of embroidery."<sup>109</sup> They attempt to cover over, both literally and figuratively, the murdered they have uncovered.

But their efforts unravel. A stonemason in the camp is called to carve tombstones for the German dead buried in the graveyard, and he is to use stones stolen from the Jewish cemetery in a nearby town. Our narrator confronts him and attempts to convince the mason not to use the stones, but in the end, he relents. While the mason rambles on about the stones, the narrator quits listening:

I was no longer listening to him. For the last few minutes I had been listening to the rumble of a train and now it was growing

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>109</sup> Gascar, "The Season of the Dead," 460.

louder. The train was about to emerge round the tip of the wood. I could tell, without waiting for it to roll past before my eyes, what sort of freight it carried. Its slow, jolting sound warned me of the other sounds that would follow although for the moment a contrary wind delayed them. I should soon hear the weeping, the cries of despair. The silence, no doubt, was due to the wind; but perhaps, too, those who were being transported, knowing what fate awaited them, had deliberately refrained from sending out their lamentations into that empty, sun-baked plain, in which the great migrations of death had never yet awakened any lasting echo.<sup>110</sup>

The prisoners can no longer turn away from the catastrophe surrounding them. The graveyard, work as they might, remains a mass grave, and the deportation trains continue to rumble past. The terror is everywhere.

In a final effort, the prisoners begin helping a Jewish partisan named Lebovitch. At night, Lebovitch hides, paradoxically, in an unused grave, and the prisoners leave him food and water during the day. To save this one man would be to achieve some kind of return to the world of justice and order, but even this is denied. Lebovitch is found out, and the prisoners simply find his hiding place empty, his jacket lying in the dirt.

In the end, the narrator frightens even the woman he has been courting from a distance. The mass graves, the deportations, and the murder of Lebovitch: the narrator tries to escape all this through a passionate moment with the young woman. However, he frightens

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 463.

her and she flees. "I leaned against a tree," he says. "Within me and about me a great silence had fallen. After a moment I wiped away my tears and went back to my dead."<sup>111</sup> He has been initiated into the terror.

The narrator returns to the dead as a member of a new community. No longer pagan or Greek, no longer bound to the cemetery and to the land, the narrator has been initiated into the community of witnesses. The deportation trains and the murders have opened him to a new responsibility; the weight of Others, murdered, destroyed, afflicted, overwhelms him, and in that overwhelming binds him.

#### B. Exposure and humanism

Gascar's narrator has been exposed to the Shoah's destruction. In this exposure, horrified fascination strips subjectivity of its power and mastery, of its horizons. Awash in the destruction and exposed to the suffering of others, the narrator cannot transcend the horror: the deportation trains, mass graves, and murder. He is exposed to the *il y a*, the neutral, and in this exposure he enters a vigilance, participates in the *il y a*. There is no subject of mastery, but only this vigilance and participation, marked by witnessing the annihilation of others.

To be exposed to the destruction of the Shoah, as we have said, is to be exposed to the neutral, the Outside, the *il y a*. Here, in

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 470.

horrified fascination, the subject is powerless; no mastery or possession here marks subjectivity. It can no longer transcend what horrifies and fascinates it. The horizons have all been nullified. It is thus that, in a discussion of messianic thought, Blanchot asks the question: "How is it possible to say: Auschwitz has happened?." <sup>112</sup> Christian and political messianism is always a thought of the end, of a "just finish." <sup>113</sup> But the interruption of history, the ultimate suffering at Auschwitz, precludes this end. To say that Auschwitz has happened is to draw a close to the event which cannot be closed. The exposure to the Outside interrupts this ending. It is on these terms, it seems, that Blanchot says, "He who has been the contemporary of the camps is forever a survivor..." <sup>114</sup>

Which is all to say that, as the moment in history which cannot be appropriated, the Shoah is, for thought, the other. It is an interruption of history in history itself. As such, the Shoah cannot be appropriated by thought. Only the neutralization of alterity can once again institute power. Greek thought, pagan thought, is always a thought of power, of assimilation and appropriation. As Levinas says:

If an exterior and foreign being is to surrender itself to intermediaries there must be produced somewhere a great "betrayal." As far as things are concerned, a surrender is carried out in their conceptualization. As for man, it can be obtained by the terror that brings a free man under the domination of

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<sup>112</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 143.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 143.



another. For the things the work of ontology consists in apprehending the individual (which alone exists) not in its individuality but in its generality (of which alone there is science). The relation with the other is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself. The ideal of the Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in...its egoism. Philosophy is an egology.<sup>115</sup>

Thus it is that philosophy is always appropriation and assimilation. The relation with the other always occurs within the horizon of being (Levinas' third term), and as such, is neutralized. But the Shoah nullifies all horizons, and thus, ontology, paganism, cannot account for our relation with it.

Exposed to the Outside, thought can no longer appropriate and assimilate, but rather, merely participates in neutrality. It is transformed into vigilance, a vigilance no longer located within an egology, but dispersed: the nomadic. The exposed is perpetually nomadic. Aharon Appelfeld has emphasized this point in his work *For Every Sin*. Theo, a survivor of the camps who is trying to return home, is constantly confronted by other refugees. They sit under trees, smoke cigarettes, play poker, lay on the ground. When they move, they move slowly, or angrily, though their anger always subsides quickly. They are adrift. Theo despises them; he finds their idleness annoying. But he slowly recognizes his own struggle in theirs: there is nowhere to go, nowhere to return to. In the end, he joins their numbers, the ranks of the homeless. As his friend tells

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<sup>115</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

him: "There's no sense seeking something that can never be attained."<sup>116</sup> There is no home to return to; the exposed are nomads.

Thus, the exposed belong to this other humanism, this Jewish humanism, which recalls us to the "exigency of strangeness."<sup>117</sup> Gascar's narrator has been exposed to the destruction of the Shoah, and as such, has been exposed to the Outside. He has been initiated into this other humanism, wherein the exposure puts the subject in question and the mastery and power of the pagan dwelling has been abolished. This other humanism is a humanism of exposure and speech: exposure to the Outside, and speech as the space where distance is maintained even in address. The community of witnesses is bound by this exposure, by this humanism. Through the mouth of Yukel, a survivor, Edmond Jabes writes, "In a village in central Europe, the Nazis one day buried some of our brothers alive. The soil shifted with them for a long time. That night, one and the same rhythm bound Israelites to the world."<sup>118</sup> The witness, too, is bound to the world through the suffering he has witnessed. He is thrust, in his fascinated horror, in his witnessing, into the catastrophe, and he is now bound by the ceaseless appeal of Auschwitz.

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<sup>116</sup> Aharon Appelfeld, *For Every Sin*, trans. by Jeffrey M. Green (New York: Grove Press, 1989) 167-8.

<sup>117</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 234.

<sup>118</sup> Jabes, *The Book of Yukel*, 120.

## Chapter 4

### A. Interruption

We have seen that our traditional notions of subjectivity cannot account for the experience (if, indeed, we can continue to use this word) of the camps. The suffering of the victims and the Muselmanner, and the horrified fascination of the witness, both open onto the neutral. Suffering as an-other time, a time without end and without recourse, inaugurates the neutral, anonymous space of the *il y a*. In fascination, the horizons crumble and the witness as subjectivity dissolves. In the anonymity of the neutral, paganism can no longer answer to the fundamental relation, the relation to others and the exterior. Nomadism is the mode of the perpetually exposed, and it defines the community of survivors and witnesses.

This exposure is fundamentally a stripping of power. The horizon, against which subjectivity can measure, collapses in the face of the Shoah. No longer is the subject whole and identified, no longer can it proceed from the site of dwelling. Rather, the subject dissolves into the anonymous. Here, in the nameless night, in the undeniable presence of this absence, there is only vigilance and passivity, the silent ruins of the site.

But the question remains: how do we encounter the Shoah?

Ontology, philosophy, is power. It is the power to neutralize alterity. Being provides measure, the horizon against which all existents are measured. It is only herein that existents can take on

their familiarity, for here the existent is subsumed beneath a general theme: being. Being, in this sense, not only provides horizon, but is the horizon itself. It is the "against-which" that allows comprehension, the horizon that allows things to be understood in their generality. Ontology is power.

For Levinas, this power is put in question by the encounter with the Other. In the face I encounter alterity and, as such, am put in question. I must respond, and as Blanchot points out, I must respond either in speech (thus entering into relation with the infinite while maintaining that absolute alterity) or through mortal violence (destroying that alterity which puts my power in question). In the encounter with the Other the horizon of being is nullified. Thus, the power of ontology is interrupted by alterity, by this alterity that, in encounter, cannot be reduced without some kind of response.

Blanchot sees a similar encounter in testimony. He writes, "...Auschwitz...imposes, through testimony, the indefeasible duty not to forget...."<sup>119</sup> Testimony, as we have seen, is this encounter with the Other. Levi's curse demands we face this other man who is fighting for scraps in the mud. Delbo's narratives demand that we recognize (at the very least, recognize) that, if we believe we can comprehend her narratives, we are deceiving ourselves. Here, in both instances, the power of subjectivity is put in question, and not only subjective power, but power itself. Thought cannot think the other except by neutralizing it. When Levinas tells us that ontology can only understand things in their generality, that is, scientifically, we must

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<sup>119</sup> Blanchot, "Do Not Forget," 247.

understand by this that ontology can only understand things within the measure of comprehension and totality: precisely what Levi and Delbo especially deny in relation to the Shoah. What testimony denies is that power (the power of subjectivity or the power of philosophy, etc.) can measure it.

After all, what is thought called upon to think here? Not dates and names, not locations and numbers. Rather, thought is here called upon to think the neutral, to think fascination and to think suffering. Thought, philosophy, is here exposed, and as such, deposed. It cannot contain the neutral, but, in turn, can only be fascinated or horrified by it. History cannot contain the interruption of history since the interruption exceeds history's power to reduce it. Philosophy cannot contain the Shoah, because the Shoah will always be the denial of power; because the Shoah, as we have said, is the immediacy of suffering, and philosophy is always the mediated; because the Shoah is the event without horizon, and philosophy is always the horizon.

A fragment of Blanchot's might be useful here. He writes:

The correct criticism of the System does not consist (as is most often, complacently, supposed) in finding fault with it, or in interpreting it insufficiently (which even Heidegger sometimes does), but rather in rendering it invincible, invulnerable to criticism or, as they say, inevitable. Then, since nothing escapes it because of its omnipresent unity and the perfect cohesion of everything, there remains no place for fragmentary writing unless it come into focus as the impossible necessary: as that which is written in the time outside time, in the sheer

suspense which without restraint breaks the seal of unity by, precisely, not breaking it, but by leaving it aside without this abandon's ever being able to be known. It is thus, inasmuch as it separates itself from the manifest, that fragmentary writing does not belong to the One.<sup>120</sup>

Philosophy, the System, the concept, is, for Blanchot, occupational; they are totalities that dictate certain understandings. Here he is very close to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari when they write, "The concept is the contour, the configuration, the constellation of an event to come.... The task of philosophy when it creates concepts...is always to extract an event from things and beings, to set up the new event from things and beings...."<sup>121</sup> Philosophy is not only, as Levinas says, an egology, but it is also totalitarian in its power. It occupies thought much like an army occupies a conquered land.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 61.

<sup>121</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 32-3.

<sup>122</sup> Contemporary continental thought can be characterized in one sense in the way Michel Foucault characterizes Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* in his preface to that work: as attempting to find a way of "living counter to all forms of fascism, whether already present or impending...." This is certainly true of Levinas' work but is especially true of Blanchot's. As participants in the conversation of philosophy, thinkers like Deleuze and Blanchot (as I have indicated earlier) have sought to indicate where philosophy becomes fascist as well: in the desire for omnipresent unity, wherein philosophy and the concepts it generates define *everything*, without leaving "room" for question. For Blanchot, the matter seems to lie, as it does so often for Levinas, in the neutralization of alterity: philosophy, in a sense, is a way of dealing with difference that always reassures the powerful. This similarity (the desire to combat fascism without becoming fascist) is interesting to note, especially given the vast differences between projects like that of Deleuze and Guattari, on the one hand, and that of Blanchot, on the other. Cf. Michel Foucault, preface, *Anti-Oedipus*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) xiii.

The fragment, for Blanchot, breaks with this totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is not fought by replacing the old regime with a new one, but rather by interruption. He writes:

*[A]ffirm the break...What break? The break with the powers that be, hence with the notion of power, hence everywhere that power predominates. This obviously applies to the University, to the idea of knowledge, to the language relations to be found in teaching, in leading, perhaps to all language, etc., but applies even more to our own conception of opposition to the powers that be, each time such opposition constitutes itself to become a party in power.<sup>123</sup>*

And further:

*This theoretical undertaking obviously does not entail drawing up a programme or a platform, but rather, independent of any programmatic project, indeed of any project, maintaining a refusal that is an affirmation, bringing out or maintaining an affirmation that does not come to any arrangements, but rather undoes arrangements, including its own, since it is in relation with disarrangement or disarray or else the non-structurable.<sup>124</sup>*

The fragment functions in Blanchot's work as this kind of interruption of the totality of the System; where the System occupies totally, the fragment appears and *is* difference. For Blanchot, there is only the affirmation of disturbance and interruption.

The irruption of difference within the totality (interruption), thus puts the totality in question without destroying or replacing it.

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<sup>123</sup> Blanchot, "Disorderly Words," 200.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 201.

The interruption cannot be appropriated; it is a refusal, a nomadic irruption. And not only does the Jew serve as this refusal for the anti-Semite and the Nazi regime, but the Shoah is this refusal within the totality of history and the discourse of philosophy. Suffering, horror, the neutral: these escape the positivity of the concept. As the interruption of history, as the without-end, Auschwitz and the Shoah cannot be conceptualized--they always escape the concept.<sup>125</sup>

Here Blanchot's notion of "un-knowledge" proves helpful. He writes, "Un-knowledge is not a lack of knowledge; it is not even knowledge of the lack but rather that which is hidden by knowledge and ignorance alike: the neutral, the un-manifest."<sup>126</sup> Knowledge "hides" the neutral, covers it over. It always appropriates and assimilates. Un-knowledge, then, would be a relation that does not assimilate, that does not appropriate and reduce. Rather, it participates: it sustains a relation with alterity that does not do mortal violence. It affirms alterity and affirms interruption in its alterity. "Enough of theory which wields and organizes knowledge," he writes.<sup>127</sup> Rather, he wants to inaugurate a new knowledge, an un-knowledge. "When knowledge is no longer a knowledge of truth, it is then that knowledge starts: a knowledge that burns thought, like knowledge of infinite patience."<sup>128</sup> This un-knowledge is the

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<sup>125</sup> In no way do I mean to imply here that the Shoah, as catastrophic event, should be affirmed, for example, in lieu of some theoretical or political end. Rather, what must be recognized, and this sense, affirmed, is difference, the difference the Shoah presents within history. Not to recognize this would be to set the entire apparatus of power back in motion, thus subsuming this moment within the totality of discourse.

<sup>126</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 63.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



participation in the neutral, the relation with alterity that does not, as Greek or pagan thought does, reduce, assimilate, and appropriate.

Which is to say that the Shoah remains for thought, for Greek thought and for ontology, the other. When Blanchot writes, "...Auschwitz...imposes, through testimony, the indefeasible duty not to forget: remember, beware of forgetfulness and yet, in that faithful memory, *never will you know*," he circumscribes this interruption.<sup>129</sup> Do not forget: the interruption, the break with the whole, the exigency of alterity initiates us into "an interminable anamnesis."<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, never will we know. Thus, when Blanchot asks, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, "How can thought be made the keeper of the holocaust where all was lost, including guardian thought?," we must answer (with him, I think) that thought cannot be made this keeper.<sup>131</sup> The interruption cannot be appropriated, cannot be assimilated. The thought of power and the site, Greek and pagan thought, cannot withstand the exigency of the Shoah. Thus, we must answer Blanchot's question: thought cannot be the keeper of the Shoah, if we mean by thought the power to understand, to grasp and to redeem. Only a thought which could sustain itself outside power and occupation could be made the keeper of the Shoah.

Blanchot's notion of Jewish humanism pushes toward this other relation that interruption inaugurates. Its nomadism releases thought from its ties to the site and dwelling, the sources of power. It is a relation with otherness that affirms alterity, that does not flee

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<sup>129</sup> Blanchot, "Do Not Forget," 247-8.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>131</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 47.

before it. Here there is a relation with Others *as* Others, with exteriority. The question is: in what sense can we say this other humanism is the *keeper* of the Shoah?

Insofar as this humanism does not reduce difference or assimilate the Other, insofar as it does not neutralize alterity, it sustains the mode of relation that the Shoah demands. When Delbo writes, "Try to look. Just try and see," she attempts to secure the alterity of her narrative, to deny the reader's ability to appropriate it.<sup>132</sup> She demands that we encounter her narrated experience without appropriating it, without weaving the discontinuous into the continuous. This humanism would speak to this end. In this relation, what is proximal nevertheless remains distant; its relation is one of sustaining difference. As Blanchot says, in this relation "[d]istance is not abolished, it is not even diminished; on the contrary, it is maintained, preserved in its purity..."<sup>133</sup>

In this other humanism there is no mediation introduced into the relation. In Heideggerian ontology, neutralization is wrought *a priori*: everything occurs in being. But for Jewish humanism, the only landscape is that of speech, the speech that does not reduce difference but rather sustains it: my addressing the Other. In the address no third term is introduced; there is only the address of one to the other, the speech of proximity that does not reduce. As Blanchot says, "Judaism is the sole thought that does not mediate."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Delbo, *None of Us Will Return*, 84.

<sup>133</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 233.

<sup>134</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 63.

But the question of keeping the Shoah here is revealed as a fruitless one. When we ask about keeping, are we not still Greeks and pagans? Do we not still seek power? Ultimately, yes, we do. The interrogations of philosophy, power, subjectivity, etc., that we have engaged in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot reveal, if nothing else, one fundamental insight: knowledge is a power relation. For ontology, and for philosophy and subjectivity, knowledge is the neutralization of alterity through mediation. Power pervades philosophy and thought. And if we ask for a thought that could keep the Shoah, whatever that might mean, then we are asking for a thought that could encompass it, embrace it, and make of it a thing to be understood.<sup>135</sup>

And this is the heart of this other humanism: it is a thought of relation, if it is a thought at all. It is the mode of encounter when the power that drives philosophy and subjectivity is stripped. It is not an encompassing thought, but a mode of encounter, a mode of encountering the unknown, the foreign, and the strange. It does not gather, does not render, and does not appropriate. It is the name of

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<sup>135</sup> Philosophy must, in this sense, become the question of philosophy, which also means that philosophy must become the question of power. It is thus, it seems, that Blanchot occupies that strange space between theory and literature, between the philosopher and the writer. It is as though Blanchot attempts to sustain a questioning outside the bounds of philosophy as organizational discourse. His notion of nomadism would "fit" this "model." Nomadism engages totalities from outside without setting itself up as the new apparatus of power. Philosophy must begin to heed this call (and it is also the call, I think, of Deleuze and Guattari). Contemporary continental theory has done just this: from Nietzsche to Heidegger, and from Heidegger to Derrida, Blanchot, Levinas, Deleuze, etc., the history of twentieth-century continental theory can be read as the questioning of the philosophy of the subject, and, thus, the questioning of philosophy itself.

the relation between two existents when they find themselves face to face and disoriented, absolutely disoriented.

Thus, this other humanism is not the keeper of the Shoah. Rather, it is the way in which we must encounter the Shoah. Levi's curse does not demand our understanding, but only our encountering of this other. The Shoah and its testimony will always be the interruption of the continuous, the interruption of discourse. Thus, there is no keeper of the Shoah, for it escapes all bounds. We are left only with our responsibility.

### B. Our Position

Our relation with the Shoah, with testimony, is defined by encounter, not knowledge. If we return to Levi's curse, we must remember that he calls us forth to encounter the Other, to "consider if this is a man" who fights for scraps of bread, who dies because of a yes or a no. We must face this Other, Levi holds, and we sense in this our responsibility as the inheritors of history. The Other, dying, destroyed, no longer even really an identity, opens the exigency of the Shoah, and we must, as Levinas tells us, respond. Our responsibility is born of this encounter.

This responsibility is born out of encounter, out of the encounter wherein the Other strips me of my power to remain myself. In the "moment" when power is arrested, in the time of the encounter which is anterior to being and to time (the time of encountering the face or the horrible), responsibility is born. And it

is the gravest of responsibilities: not that responsibility of duties or deeds, but the responsibility of one human being to another, called out, naked, stripped of all power. And returned to oneself, one's unique self, only in the bound form of the hostage. If I hear the Other, I am bound to the Other.

This responsibility, Levinas tells us, is:

A responsibility stemming from a time before my freedom--before my beginning, before any present. A fraternity existing in extreme separation.... Responsibility for my neighbor dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past that was never present and is more ancient than consciousness of... A responsibility for my neighbor, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner, to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me--nothing in the order of the thing, of the something, of number or causality.

It is the responsibility of a hostage....<sup>136</sup>

This responsibility is born of encounter, the very encounter Levi demands in his curse. But here Levinas draws us toward Blanchot's notion of this other humanism more than ever, for here, I am bound completely to the Other, beyond any ordered reality and anterior to any commitments. The Other has here bound me to him, in his very address, in his face. This is not a demand that the ordered world can answer to, a demand like Kant's Categorical Imperative, to which all rational beings must adhere. No; this demand is made upon me and me only, drawing me out to account for it. As Levinas says, "In the

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<sup>136</sup> Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," from *The Levinas Reader*, ed. by Sean Hand, trans. by Sean Hand and Michael Temple, 84

face of the other man I am inescapably responsible and consequently *the unique and chosen one* [my emphasis]."<sup>137</sup> I must respond; I am responsible. I am, in a very important sense, a hostage.

Thus, in the encounter, 'I' am dissolved, stripped of my power and identity. But I am also returned, but this return has its own transfiguration. Blanchot tells us:

The hostage is the nonconsenting, the unchosen guarantee of a promise he hasn't made, the irreplaceable one who is not in his own place. It is through the other that I am the same, through the other that I am myself: it is through the other who has always withdrawn me from myself. The Other, if he calls upon me, calls upon someone who is not I: the first come or least of men; by no means the unique being I would like to be. It is thus that he assigns me to passivity....<sup>138</sup>

The return is not the return to the stable identity of the same as "I would like to be." Rather, it is as the hostage, the bound. I am unique, but I am no longer I: I am the bound one; the one on whom responsibility for the Other lies. For Blanchot, the encounter with the Other, this responsibility, is a kind of transfiguration.

Thus, in this other humanism we are bound to the Other, not by an order in the world, but by this responsibility. The encounter with the Other, which strips subjectivity of all power and identity, calls me out in my responsibility. I am bound to the Other "prior to" all ontological orders. Thus, responsibility opens in the "moment" when power is arrested, in the moment when subjectivity no longer rules.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>138</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 18.

It is this relation, our relation with the Other, to which Blanchot holds paganism and ontology does not hold the "key."<sup>139</sup>

Nevertheless, as Blanchot reminds us at the end of his essay on being Jewish, human power, the power of subjectivity, is "capable of anything."<sup>140</sup> He writes:

Anti-Semitism, in this sense, is in no way accidental; it gives a figure to the repulsion inspired by the Other, the uneasiness before what comes from afar and elsewhere: the need to kill the Other, that is, to submit to the all-powerfulness of death what cannot be measured in terms of power.<sup>141</sup>

For both Blanchot and Levinas, the encounter with the Other demands responding, *whether that response be speech or mortal violence*. Mortal violence, as Levinas has indicated, is simply an inverse of speech, the hateful response.<sup>142</sup> The Other demands my response, and anti-Semitism is the response that gives body to the "repulsion" of being stripped of all identity and power. To use a Nietzschean term, it is reaction *par excellence*. Human power is capable of anything because it can refuse, through mortal violence, even the exigency of the Other. But this refusal is nonetheless a turning toward the exigency of the Other. As Blanchot says, "The anti-Semite, at grips with the infinite, thus commits himself to a limitless movement of refusal."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 232.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 234-5.

<sup>142</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985) 89.

<sup>143</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 235.

In the encounter with testimony, with Levi's curse and Delbo's exteriorized narratives, we are thus thrust into this relation with the Other. The question centers around what our relation with the Shoah must be. As the "absolute event" of history, to use Blanchot's terms, in what sense can we enter into relation with the Shoah? We must encounter it as nomads and hostages. Here is the event which cannot be reduced to the historical circumstances that gave rise to it. History, the thematization and contextualization of events, would have us reduce the Shoah to Hitler's anti-Semitism, Eichmann's bureaucratic efficacy, the failure of enlightenment values, etc. But each contextualization only occults the horror of the neutral. The Shoah exceeds all bounds.

Note the visage of the Muselmann. Blanchot writes, "The suffering of our time: '*A wasted man, bent head, bowed shoulders, unthinking, gaze extinguished*'.<sup>144</sup> Levi, too, writes:

...if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.<sup>145</sup>

Levi does not choose the image of the SS man, truncheon in hand with a bloodthirsty dog beside him, as his image of evil. Rather, he chooses the visage of the Muselmann, destroyed, broken,

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<sup>144</sup> Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 81.

<sup>145</sup> Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 90.



extinguished but still alive. The destruction exceeds even the Nazis' power, while nevertheless arising from the Nazi terror.

And this is the paradox of the Shoah, it seems. It is the event of history that cannot be reduced to history. It is the break with all forms of totality: the narrative of history, the power of subjectivity, and even the power of the totalitarian State. The suffering of those in the camps, the Shoah itself, can only be circumscribed. The break can only be circumscribed. But history and subjectivity, philosophy and the tyranny of the State can always appropriate and neutralize alterity. Human power is capable of anything.

But this appropriation is still a relation with the infinite; it is the violent response, the insistence on paganism and the power of the site. But it does not answer to the demand of the Other; it cannot answer to this demand. For in this demand I am stripped of my identity and bound to the Other fundamentally. The refusal of this demand can be realized only violently: in the mortal violence of murder or in the neutralizing violence of ontology.

The encounter with the Other, by thrusting me into the anonymous, exiles me from the site. And in this nomadic space I am bound to the Other, as a hostage. My responsibility opens in this space and it binds me. The body of this responsibility is speech, the speech wherein "[d]istance is not abolished, it is not even diminished; on the contrary, it is maintained...."<sup>146</sup> In this sense, speech affirms distance, affirms the break--it does not reduce. The unknown does

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<sup>146</sup> Blanchot, "The Indestructible," 233.

not become known, but becomes that which I must bear, as that which binds me. The Shoah thus binds the generations which follow.

My responsibility for the Shoah is not that of a doer in relation to a deed. It is a moral responsibility, but not in this strict sense. Rather, it is the responsibility which "precedes," in an immemorial past, any kind of order or ethics. It is the burning immediacy of the Other's proximity, which is nevertheless defined by distance. It is the obliteration of the horizon, whether that horizon be history, philosophy, subjectivity; it nullifies our power to envelop and comprehend and narrate and appropriate. It is the break with totality, while always threatened by totalities. And in that break all power dissolves. As the inheritors of history, as the generations that follow catastrophe, we are bound to this break, to this cry.

In a footnote Blanchot writes of speech:

With the experience that he draws from himself and from his learning, Gerschom Scholem has said, speaking of the relations between the Germans and the Jews: "The abyss opened between us by these events cannot be measured...For, in truth, it is impossible to realize completely what happened. Its incomprehensible nature has to do with the very essence of the phenomenon: it is impossible fully to understand it, that is to say, integrate it into our consciousness." Impossible, therefore, to forget it, impossible to remember it. Also impossible, in speaking about it, to speak of it--and finally, as there is nothing but this

incomprehensible event to say, it is speech  
alone that must bear it without saying it.<sup>147</sup>

We must encounter this event, and we cannot comprehend it. Speech  
must bear the Shoah without saying it, as if every homeland were  
destroyed, every power abolished, and every horizon toppled.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 243.